



Bonsai 101

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PARTS:

- [Sapling \(1\)](#)
- [Soil mix \(1\)](#)
- [Small rocks \(1\)](#)
- [Screen \(1\)](#)
- [Pottery \(1\)](#)
- [Small rake \(1\)](#)
- [Fine shears \(1\)](#)
- [Copper wire \(1\)](#)
- [Hemp twine \(1\)](#)
- [Water \(1\)](#)
- [Fertilizer: various types and strengths \(1\)](#)
- [Moss, pebbles, and other plants \(optional\) \(1\)](#)

SUMMARY

Bonsai plants are, in their essence, little trees. Yet the art of bonsai has a much greater scope: it strives to replicate nature. It is an art that emulates the elements and their action on living plants. A tree is just a sapling until the roots grow, the water comes into the soil, and the forces of sun, wind, and gravity sculpt it into shape. The bonsai artist uses a variety

of tools to replicate these effects and create a perfect miniature version of life on Earth.

Watching your tiny tree as it cycles through the seasons, going dormant, pushing out leaf buds, blossoming, and then producing fruits or berries is very rewarding, and a wonderful way to connect with the natural world.

The art of growing bonsai is well adapted to the urban gardener. These plantings require less water, less soil, and less square footage. But just because they're diminutive, doesn't mean that they don't need great amounts of care and tending. Regular waterings are the most essential. Tasks such as repotting and restyling are done when needed, as well as pruning, training, and shaping. These chores are not without reward. Because bonsai can recreate complete landscapes, the impression of grand natural space exudes from these small displays.

Aesthetics dominate the art of bonsai. Many stringent rules exist for the purists dedicated to this art. Ancient standards declare that certain trees are to be grown in certain shapes and planted into certain pots. But the modern, creative gardener follows her own path toward beauty. Just be sure to never lose sight of the visual appeal and design of your plantings.

The more you learn about bonsai, the more you realize what you have yet to learn. To properly cultivate a design could take decades. From the beginning, art is made and life is growing, but the passage of time is the core of bonsai. Many experts in the field have been growing bonsai 50 years or more. This is a simple primer to help you establish your roots.

Step 1 — Choose your tree.



- Choosing the species of tree to grow is the first, and possibly most difficult, task. Pines and maples are perhaps the most recognizable bonsai. These trees are classic beauties and well suited for miniaturization. Flowering and fruiting trees are popular as well, especially the quince and pomegranate.
- Bonsai trees are not necessarily always trees. Many shrubs can be grown and manipulated into bonsai forms that belie their natural state. Wisteria vines and azaleas can be shaped into thick tree trunks that they would never produce normally.
- The tree can be grown from seed or propagated through a cutting. The easiest way to begin is to select a sapling from your favorite nursery.
- **Bonsai Styles:** Bonsai are often classified into five basic styles — formal upright, informal upright, slanting, cascade, and semi-cascade — based on the overall shape and how much the trunk slants. You'll also find dozens of additional styles such as literati, windswept, and weeping branch, which you can mix and modify as you see fit.
- A good introduction can be found at on [Wikipedia](#) or in *Bonsai for*

Beginners by Craig Coussins
(Sterling Publishing).

Step 2 — Select a complementary container.



- The chosen tree will dictate its container. The two must make a visually pleasing combination. Traditionally, the intended shape of the tree is matched to a specific pot.
- For instance, a straight-sided pot would be used for a straight-growing formal upright style tree, while a round or oval pot would be used for an informal style with a curving trunk or limbs. The same rules state that evergreens should be exclusively set into unglazed containers.
- While there is room for variance, in general you'll find that your eye will naturally follow some of these same rules of design out of instinct. When choosing a pot, consider the sides and consider the depth. If you're growing a tree that will cascade out of the pot like it's growing on the edge of a cliff, you'll want to choose a tall pot; a collective planting meant to look like a meadow needs a wide and shallow one.
- Finally, select the hue of the pottery. Try to complement the color of the leaves most of all.

Step 3 — Prepare the soil.



- Dirt is a tree's lifeline. The soil clinging to the roots provides the tree with its moisture and nutrients. It is crucial to use a mix that will hold water, but not keep the roots too wet. The grain of the soil is also a consideration. When a tree's root encounters a large, sharp rock, the tip of the root splits in two and grows around it. The result is a finer, thinner root, unable to take up as much water as a large root, therefore contributing to natural miniaturization.
- Plant your bonsai tree in soil with a combination of rich dirt and larger bits of rock to replicate this effect. You can purchase specialty soil, custom-tailored to suit the unique texture and drainage needs of bonsai, or you can customize your own soil with raw materials such as bark, coconut fiber, perlite, and rock chips.

Step 4 — Plant the bonsai.



- If the pot does not have drainage holes, use a drill with a ceramic bit to add a hole. To prevent soil loss, cover it with a piece of screen.
- Before planting gently remove the tree from its container and inspect the roots. They will likely have grown around each other. Pull loose these tangled, skinny roots with your hands, and trim away the shaggy ends with hand shears. Also remove any brown or unhealthy roots. Next, find the taproot (the primary root), and cut it off. This is an important step to dwarf the plant. Finally, fan out and thin the roots at the base of the trunk using the rake. Always use a gentle touch with the roots.
- Cover the bottom of the pot with soil. Add the tree with its roots fanned out wide. Cover the roots with soil, filling the pot evenly until the surface of the dirt is level.

Step 5 — Complete the bonsai environment.



- Now give the tree a generous drink, to “water it in.” Finally, add any moss, rocks, or companion plants to flesh out your design.

Step 6 — Tend the bonsai.



- Place the tree in direct sunlight. If the light seems too intense for young or delicate trees, hang a shade cloth to filter the light. Water as needed. Do not put your tree on a strict schedule. Wait for it to become mostly dry before you water.
- Maintain the health of the tree, and begin to shape it, with simple pruning and pinching. Prune any branches that are less than healthy, or that stand in the way of the shape you'd like to make (Figure I). Pinching back new growth at the ends of branches will encourage thickening.
- Before you start shaping the tree, allow it to grow until it seems well established in its new environment. Depending on your patience, this might be a season, or a whole year, or only a few weeks.
- Feed the bonsai throughout the year. During winter dormancy, feed it a fertilizer low in nitrogen. When spring arrives, increase the amount of nitrogen, and through the summer use a balanced food.

Step 7 — Shape the bonsai.



- When shaping trees, the objective is to manipulate the tree, without scarring the bark, to create the illusion of years of natural stress from the forces of nature. Start slow, with gentle tension. You can gradually increase the tension over time.
- Here are 3 methods:
- Wire. When wiring, use care not to damage the tree. Don't wrap the wire too tightly around the wood. Check the wiring often, removing and replacing it as the tree grows. Begin by coiling one end of the copper wire around the base of the tree, and wind it along the trunk or branch you wish to bend. Be certain to lay the wire evenly so as to properly distribute the pressure. When the tree has been wired, bend the branch or trunk carefully with both hands, gripping evenly to avoid snapping the tree.
- Tie. Tie a piece of thin hemp rope or cotton twine around the pot. Now tie a piece of twine to the branch you wish to bend, and pull it down with the string until it curves as you like. To maintain the tension, tie the loose end to the string that's tied around the pot.
- Weight. Choose a small stone, not heavy enough to break the tree, and hang it from the trunk or branch with a small length of wire or string. Don't hang the weight from the very tip, as you could break the tree. Instead, start 1/3 of the way from the tip, wrap the wire or string evenly around until you reach the end, and then let the stone dangle.
- Depending on the thickness of the trunk, and the shape you intend to create, you might use these techniques over the course of a season, or even for a year or more.

Step 8 — Display the bonsai.



- Potting a perfect tree into a perfect pot is not the final step. This art must be displayed, and thus honored. Placing the tree on a small stand gives it a sense of importance, and elevates it above the common. Consider something simple, such as a piece of cork, a modest wooden plant stand with short legs that doesn't throw off the balance, a slab of raw slate, or a lacquered tray.

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